DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 994 TM 028 281

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| AUTHOR | Pinto, Marcelo F. |
| TITLE | Impact of Attendance at Parent Conferences on Elementary and Middle School Title I Students' Reading and Math Test Scores. |
| PUB DATE | 1998-04-00 |
| NOTE | 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Analysis of Covariance; *Attendance; Compensatory Education; Effect Size; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Junior High School Students; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; *Parent Conferences; Parent Participation; *Standardized Tests; *Test Results |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Dallas Independent School District TX; *Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I |

ABSTRACT

The effects of overall attendance at parent conferences on Title I student's standardized test scores were studied in the Dallas (Texas) Public Schools. Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVA's) were conducted to investigate the effect of overall attendance on students' standardized test scores, and Cohen's "f" statistics were used as an index of effect size. In the 1996-97 school year, three parent conferences (fall, winter, and spring) were scheduled. Data indicate the number of conferences attended by at least one parent or other responsible adult for each child participating in Title I services. For the whole year, someone attended at least 1 parent conference for 36,528 preschool and primary grade students (65% of Title I students), 17,238 elementary school students (53%), 5,319 middle school students (29%), and 4,991 high school students (21%). Taken together, findings indicate that parents were more likely to attend the fall conference. When the standardized test scores of children in elementary and middle school were examined, it was found that children whose parents attended at least one conference had higher scores for reading comprehension and mathematics. However, effect sizes were small. (Contains three figures, three tables, and seven references.) (SLD)

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ED 418 994

# Impact of Attendance at Parent Conferences on Elementary and Middle School Title I Students' Reading and Math Test Scores

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This paper is prepared for the:
Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Diego, CA
April 1998

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**Impact of Attendance at Parent Conferences on Elementary and Middle School Title I Students' Reading and Math Test Scores**[1]

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Dallas Public Schools

ANCOVAs were conducted to investigate the effect of overall attendance at parent conferences on students' standardized test scores. Cohen's *f* statistics were employed as an index of effect size. In general, children with representation at a parent conference scored higher on standardized reading and mathematics tests than those without representation. However, effect sizes were small.

Parental involvement has defined defined as the building of "partnerships between home and school" to bolster "parents' capacity to improve their children's learning" (U. S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 93). Parent services and activities at the Dallas Public Schools provide supplemental educational and related services to Title I students and parents. As determined in the *Improving America's School Act* (P.L. 103-761), parent involvement makes it possible for parents to "contribute to their children's success by helping at home and becoming partners with teachers so that children can achieve high standards" [Sec. 1001 (c) (7)]. In addition, a local education agency may only receive Title I funds if it implements programs, activities and procedures for the involvement of parents in programs assisted under this title. Such activities and procedures must be planned and implemented with meaningful consultation with the parents of participating children.

Why Involve Parents

Title I schools provide services to students and their families to alleviate the negative effects of non-school factors on school attendance and academic performance. The involvement of parents has been found to help (a) raise the academic achievement level of their children, (b) establish a viable home-school connection, (c) improve children's attitudes toward school, (d) provide parents a greater understanding of school work, and (e) enable parents and children to communicate better (e.g., Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Epstein, 1983, 1995; Teale, 1984). Research also has shown that school practices to involve parents are strong predictors of actual parent involvement (Epstein, 1996) and the type of parental involvement in children's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). Activities must be of sufficient size, scope and quality to give reasonable promise of substantial progress toward achieving the goals of the program.

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[1] Paper presented at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Diego, CA, April 1998.

Epstein (1992, 1995) proposed six types of parent involvement (summarized in Figure 1). Each type of parent involvement has a series of implications for the school (what the school needs to do), for parents (how parents are expected to participate), and for teachers (how teachers facilitate the involvement of parents). Of the many goals schools should meet, it is recommended that schools provide parents with (a) timely information about programs; (b) school performance profiles and individual student results; (c) a description and explanation of the school curriculum, forms of assessment used to measure student progress, and the proficiency levels students are expected to meet; and (d) opportunities to participate in the decision-making process with other parents. Parent-teacher conferences provide a prime opportunity for direct communication with teachers and school administration. Parent conferences help parents to understand the academic requirements, monitor their children's progress, and participate in the decisions regarding their children's education.

**Type 1. Parenting**

Improving parents' understanding of parenting and child development; helping families establish a home environment supportive of children as students. Teachers must communicate with parents effectively, learning to understand student diversity.

**Type 2. Communicating**

Communicating with parents and keeping them informed about their child's progress and school programs. Designing effective school-to-home and home-to-school means of communication.

**Type 3. Volunteering**

Encouraging parent volunteering at the school and participation in school activities; organizing volunteer activities. Teachers and administration must be ready to recognize parents' talents and tap all available human resources.

**Type 4. Learning at home**

Providing information and ideas on how to help students at home with homework, curriculum decisions, planning, study skills, and so forth. Teachers must be sensitive to and cognizant of families' resources or lack thereof when assigning tasks and create solutions for both students and families.

**Type 5. Decision making**

Including parents in school decisions and planning; developing parent leaderships.

**Type 6. Collaborating with the community**

Identifying and harnessing resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

*Figure 1.* Summary of Epstein's (1992) six types of parent involvement and their underlying objectives.

## Method

In the 1996-97 school year, three parent conferences (fall, winter and spring) were scheduled in the Dallas Public Schools. Data processing personnel in each school were responsible for inputting parent conference attendance data into databases. Schools were instructed that attendance at a parent conference included attendance at the scheduled parent conference or at any other time in which teachers conveyed to a parent the same information as that in the scheduled conference.

It is important to stress that no data were collected on the actual number of attending parents. Rather, attendance consisted of the number of students represented at a conference by at least one parent or guardian. When a parent attended a conference, thus representing the child, the child received a score in the attendance database. Moreover, if a parent attended conferences for multiple children, each child received a score. Finally, any adult, not necessarily a parent, could represent a child (e.g., a grandparent).

### Overall Attendance at Parent Conferences, Attendance Level and Student Outcomes

Overall attendance was calculated as the number of children represented by a parent at least once, regardless of which conference was attended. In addition, attendance level was calculated as the number of children with parental representation at none, one, two, or all of the scheduled conferences. Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted to investigate the effect of overall attendance on students' standardized test scores. The *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* (*ITBS*) and *Spanish Assessment of Basic Education* (*SABE*) reading comprehension subtest and mathematics total Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE[2]) scores were used.

ANCOVAs were performed to control for initial differences which might introduce a confounding effect on student outcomes. The effect of the following variables was controlled: (a) pretest score, (b) race or ethnicity, (c) gender, (d) economic status, and (e) language status. Cohen's *f* statistics were computed to produce an index of effect size, or the proportion of the total variability (differences in test scores) explained by a factor (overall attendance). Cohen's *f* values can be interpreted as follows: Cohen's $f = .10$, the effect size is small to medium; Cohen's $f = .25$, the effect size is medium to large; and Cohen's $f = .50$, the effect size is very large. Effect size can be interpreted as the practical significance of the differences among groups, especially when sample size is large. Effect size provides meaningful information only when statistically significant differences are found.

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[2] NCE scores are based on an equal-interval normalized scale and allow mathematical functions to be performed appropriately. NCE scores are calculated by dividing the normal curve into 98 equal units, or intervals, with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 21.06. NCE scores of 1, 50, and 99 correspond to the 1st, 50th, and 99th percentiles, respectively. Other NCE scores and percentiles do not correspond because NCEs have equal intervals, whereas percentiles do not. Meaningful comparison of student performance on a variety of tests and subtests can be made because NCE units have the same meaning across tests.

## Results

### Attendance at the Fall, Winter and Spring Parent Conferences

Analysis of the number of children represented by a parent at the fall, winter and spring parent conferences (Table 1) revealed between-grade and between-conference differences. Grade level differences were noted markedly between lower and upper grades. Attendance was highest in Grades PK-3, whereas the lowest attendance rates were found in the middle and high school grades. In addition, it was noted that attendance decreased noticeably between the fall, winter and spring.

Table 1

Number and Percent of Title I Students Represented at the 1996-97 Fall, Winter and Spring Parent Conferences by Grade

| | | Conference | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Fall | | Winter | | Spring | | Overall[a] | |
| Grade | N | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| | | | | Primary | | | | | |
| EC | 590 | 87 | 15 | 124 | 21 | 154 | 26 | 233 | 39 |
| PK | 5,211 | 2,129 | 41 | 2,197 | 42 | 2,092 | 40 | 3,520 | 68 |
| K | 12,621 | 5,996 | 48 | 5,095 | 40 | 4,817 | 38 | 8,654 | 69 |
| 1 | 13,458 | 6,208 | 46 | 5,092 | 38 | 4,870 | 36 | 8,871 | 66 |
| 2 | 12,312 | 5,453 | 44 | 4,515 | 37 | 4,299 | 35 | 7,804 | 63 |
| 3 | 11,835 | 5,287 | 45 | 4,076 | 34 | 3,950 | 33 | 7,446 | 63 |
| Total | 56,027 | 25,160 | 45 | 21,099 | 38 | 20,182 | 36 | 36,528 | 65 |
| | | | | Elementary | | | | | |
| 4 | 11,414 | 4,493 | 39 | 3,737 | 33 | 3,287 | 29 | 6,617 | 58 |
| 5 | 10,812 | 3,837 | 35 | 3,134 | 29 | 2,649 | 25 | 5,681 | 53 |
| 6 | 10,198 | 3,362 | 33 | 2,674 | 26 | 2,064 | 20 | 4,940 | 48 |
| Total | 32,424 | 11,692 | 36 | 9,545 | 29 | 8,000 | 25 | 17,238 | 53 |
| | | | | Middle School | | | | | |
| 7 | 9,359 | 1,636 | 17 | 1,409 | 15 | 743 | 8 | 2,786 | 30 |
| 8 | 9,247 | 1,424 | 15 | 1,308 | 14 | 674 | 7 | 2,533 | 27 |
| Total | 18,606 | 3,060 | 16 | 2,717 | 15 | 1,417 | 8 | 5,319 | 29 |
| | | | | High School | | | | | |
| 9 | 9,376 | 1,291 | 14 | 761 | 8 | 655 | 7 | 2,051 | 22 |
| 10 | 5,696 | 801 | 14 | 441 | 8 | 365 | 6 | 1,256 | 22 |
| 11 | 4,407 | 616 | 14 | 340 | 8 | 219 | 5 | 908 | 21 |
| 12 | 4,080 | 487 | 12 | 301 | 7 | 230 | 6 | 776 | 19 |
| Total | 23,559 | 3,195 | 14 | 1,843 | 8 | 1,469 | 6 | 4,991 | 21 |
| District | 130,616 | 43,107 | 33 | 35,204 | 27 | 31,068 | 24 | 64,076 | 49 |

[a]"Overall" indicates that a student was represented by a parent in at least one of the three conferences.

Although Title I legislation requires schools to inform parents of their children's academic progress, the number of parent conferences is not specified. Therefore, attendance at one parent

conference indicated that a school was in compliance with the Title I legislation. Overall attendance determined the number of students represented at least once in the school year. Again, lower-grade students were represented by a parent more frequently than upper grade students (primary = 65%, elementary = 53%, middle school = 29%, high school = 21%).

Attendance at the parent conferences was represented in Figure 2 to facilitate the interpretation of results. Interestingly, Early Childhood (EC) students had the lowest representation in the primary grades. Furthermore, unlike attendance in all other grades, attendance increased between the fall, winter and spring conferences. It is possible that the parents of EC students do not yet emphasize academics in their young children's schooling. That could also explain why parents of EC students attended the spring conference more frequently than the other conferences. In the spring, these parents may have been anticipating their children's passage to Prekindergarten.

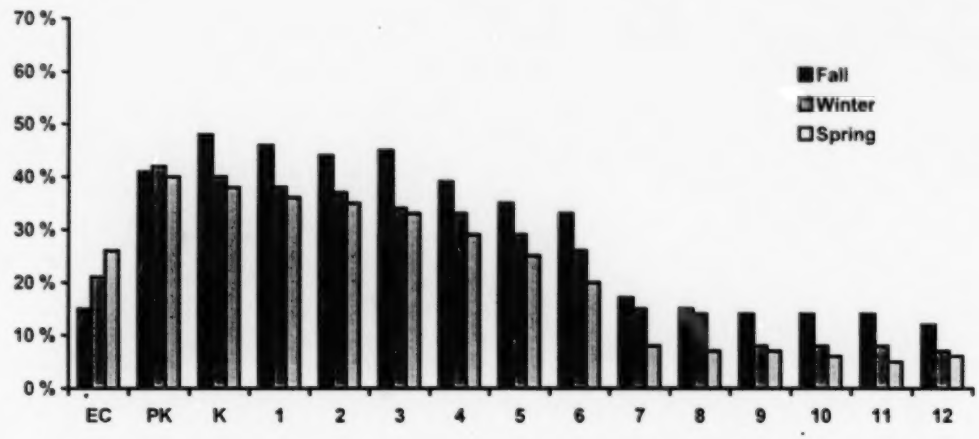


*Figure 2.* Percent attendance at the fall, winter and spring 1996-97 parent conferences by grade.

For all other grades, it is evident that the higher the grade, the lower the attendance at parent conferences regardless of period (fall, winter, spring). For Grades 1-12, attendance was highest in the fall and lowest in the spring. It is possible that parents were more likely to attend conferences early in the school year to find out as much as they could about their children's education and placed less importance on subsequent conferences.

Attendance Level

Attendance level made it possible to examine the number of students represented at none, one, two, or all parent conferences (Table 2). Districtwide, 51% of the students were represented in none of

the parent conferences. The highest numbers of students without representation were in the high school (79%) and middle school (71%) grades. The number of children with representation in all three parent conferences was low for all grades (primary = 5%-17%, elementary = 8%-13%, middle school = 2%, and high school = 1%). It is evident that parents attend at least one conference and place less emphasis on attending the others. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, parents attended the fall conference more frequently than the winter and spring conferences.

Taken together, these findings suggest that parents generally attend the fall conference, conceivably because it is held early in the school year. With the availability of two other conferences, particularly the parents of elementary school children may choose to attend another one rather than all three. Parents of middle and high school children seem to attend only one conference, though less frequently than those of lower grade children.

Table 2

Title I Students Represented by a Parent at None, One, Two, or Three of the 1996-97 Parent Conferences by Grade

| | | Conferences Attended by a Parent[a] | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | None | | One | | Two | | Three | |
| Grade | N | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| **Primary Schools** | | | | | | | | | |
| EC | 590 | 357 | 61 | 129 | 22 | 76 | 13 | 28 | 5 |
| PK | 5,211 | 1,691 | 32 | 1,464 | 28 | 1,214 | 23 | 842 | 16 |
| K | 12,621 | 3,967 | 31 | 3,567 | 28 | 2,920 | 23 | 2,167 | 17 |
| 1 | 13,458 | 4,587 | 34 | 3,739 | 28 | 2,965 | 22 | 2,167 | 16 |
| 2 | 12,312 | 4,508 | 37 | 3,256 | 26 | 2,633 | 21 | 1,915 | 16 |
| 3 | 11,835 | 4,389 | 37 | 3,306 | 28 | 2,413 | 20 | 1,727 | 15 |
| Total | 56,027 | 19,499 | 35 | 15,461 | 28 | 12,221 | 22 | 8,846 | 16 |
| **Elementary Schools** | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | 11,414 | 4,797 | 42 | 3,145 | 28 | 2,044 | 18 | 1,428 | 13 |
| 5 | 10,812 | 5,131 | 47 | 2,823 | 26 | 1,777 | 16 | 1,081 | 10 |
| 6 | 10,198 | 5,258 | 52 | 2,599 | 25 | 1,522 | 15 | 819 | 8 |
| Total | 32,424 | 15,186 | 47 | 8,567 | 26 | 5,343 | 17 | 3,328 | 10 |
| **Middle Schools** | | | | | | | | | |
| 7 | 9,359 | 6573 | 70 | 1,948 | 21 | 674 | 7 | 164 | 2 |
| 8 | 9,247 | 6714 | 73 | 1,800 | 19 | 593 | 6 | 140 | 2 |
| Total | 18,606 | 13,287 | 71 | 3,748 | 20 | 1,267 | 7 | 304 | 2 |
| **High School Grades** | | | | | | | | | |
| 9 | 9,376 | 7,325 | 78 | 1,506 | 16 | 434 | 5 | 111 | 1 |
| 10 | 5,696 | 4,440 | 78 | 972 | 17 | 217 | 4 | 67 | 1 |
| 11 | 4,407 | 3,499 | 79 | 689 | 16 | 171 | 4 | 48 | 1 |
| 12 | 4,080 | 3,304 | 81 | 581 | 14 | 148 | 4 | 47 | 1 |
| Total | 23,559 | 18,568 | 79 | 3,748 | 16 | 970 | 4 | 273 | 1 |
| District | 130,616 | 66,540 | 51 | 31,524 | 24 | 19,801 | 15 | 12,751 | 10 |

[a]Parent conferences were scheduled in the fall, winter and spring in 1996-97.

Effects of Parent Attendance on Students' Test Scores

The ultimate goal of parent involvement is the improvement of children's academic performance. Overall attendance at parent conferences was employed as an index of parent involvement to investigate whether children with parental representation for at least one conference scored better than their unrepresented counterparts on standardized tests. Results generally revealed significant between-group differences in mean *ITBS/SABE* reading comprehension and mathematics total NCE scores (Table 3).

Table 3

Results of Analyses of Covariance of Overall Attendance at Parent Conferences and Elementary and Middle School Students' *ITBS/SABE* NCE Scores

| | Overall Attendance | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | At Least One | | | None | | | | | Effect |
| Grade | N | Mean | SD | N | Mean | SD | *F*-Value | *p* | Size |
| | | | | Reading Comprehension | | | | | |
| 1 | 225 | 48.1 | 19.0 | 206 | 40.0 | 17.4 | 15.9*** | .000 | .19 |
| 2 | 5,390 | 48.7 | 18.5 | 2,851 | 42.6 | 18.4 | 46.4*** | .000 | .08 |
| 3 | 5,113 | 44.7 | 20.0 | 2,728 | 37.7 | 18.9 | 25.6*** | .000 | .05 |
| 4 | 4,359 | 42.6 | 19.0 | 3,022 | 36.0 | 18.6 | 35.8*** | .000 | .07 |
| 5 | 3,669 | 42.2 | 18.4 | 3,211 | 36.5 | 18.2 | 20.2*** | .000 | .05 |
| 6 | 3,349 | 46.9 | 17.8 | 3,416 | 41.2 | 17.7 | 37.4*** | .000 | .08 |
| 7 | 1,861 | 41.4 | 19.5 | 4,339 | 35.9 | 17.6 | 17.6*** | .000 | .05 |
| 8 | 1,782 | 44.9 | 18.9 | 4,591 | 40.5 | 18.1 | 5.7* | .017 | .03 |
| Total | 25,748 | 44.9 | 19.1 | 24,364 | 36.6 | 18.3 | 185.1*** | .000 | .06 |
| | | | | Math Total | | | | | |
| 1 | 4,784 | 49.3 | 21.8 | 2,533 | 43.1 | 21.8 | 51.1*** | .000 | .08 |
| 2 | 5,408 | 53.8 | 21.2 | 2,533 | 46.6 | 21.2 | 46.8*** | .000 | .08 |
| 3 | 5,127 | 51.7 | 20.2 | 2,877 | 44.4 | 20.7 | 75.8*** | .000 | .10 |
| 4 | 4,338 | 55.2 | 19.3 | 2,730 | 48.8 | 20.1 | 51.5*** | .000 | .08 |
| 5 | 3,602 | 51.4 | 18.1 | 2,992 | 46.2 | 18.5 | 19.0*** | .000 | .05 |
| 6 | 3,355 | 56.5 | 18.9 | 3,153 | 50.0 | 19.7 | 34.0*** | .000 | .07 |
| 7 | 1,855 | 47.3 | 19.8 | 3,388 | 42.6 | 18.4 | 9.9** | .002 | .04 |
| 8 | 1,491 | 47.0 | 18.5 | 4,234 | 43.6 | 18.3 | 0.5 | .467 | -- |
| Total | 29,960 | 52.2 | 20.2 | 25,877 | 45.6 | 19.8 | 450.3*** | .000 | .09 |

*Note*. Effect size is based on Cohen's *f* and is reported only for significant *p* values. *p* indicates the probability that the significant *F*-value was obtained due to error. Effect sizes of .10, .25, and .40 or higher are considered small, medium, and large, respectively.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Students with parental representation scored generally higher than students without representation. The overall mean reading comprehension scores for Grades 1-8 students were approximately 45 for students with representation and 37 for those without representation. The overall mean mathematics scores for those groups were 52 and 46, respectively.

Significant differences by grade were also found. For example, the mean (Mn) reading comprehension scores were approximately 48 for Grade 1 students with parental representation and 40 for Grade 1 students with no parental representation at parent conferences. In Grade 2, mean mathematics NCE scores were also higher for students with representation than for students without representation (Mn = 54 and 47, respectively). The *ITBS/SABE* mean scores for reading comprehension and mathematics total are represented graphically in Figure 3. All mean scores were higher for the students with representation than for those without representation at parent conferences (except for Grade 8 mathematics scores with no statistically significant difference).

The significant differences between *ITBS/SABE* reading and math scores must be interpreted with caution. Analysis of effect sizes indicated that only a small portion of the total variance could be attributed to overall attendance. For example, Grade 3 students with parental representation scored higher in reading comprehension than their counterparts (Mn = 45 and Mn = 38, respectively). However, the effect size for that difference was very small (Cohen's $f = .05$). Small to medium effect sizes were found only for differences in reading scores for Grade 1 (Cohen's $f = .19$) and mathematics total scores for Grade 3 (Cohen's $f = .10$).

Effect size was very small for the District differences in reading comprehension mean scores (Cohen's $f = .06$). For mathematics total, District differences in mean scores produced a small effect size (Cohen's $f = .09$). Cohen's $f$ values nearing .10 were often found for reading (e.g., Grades 2 and 6, Cohen's $f = .08$) and for mathematics scores.

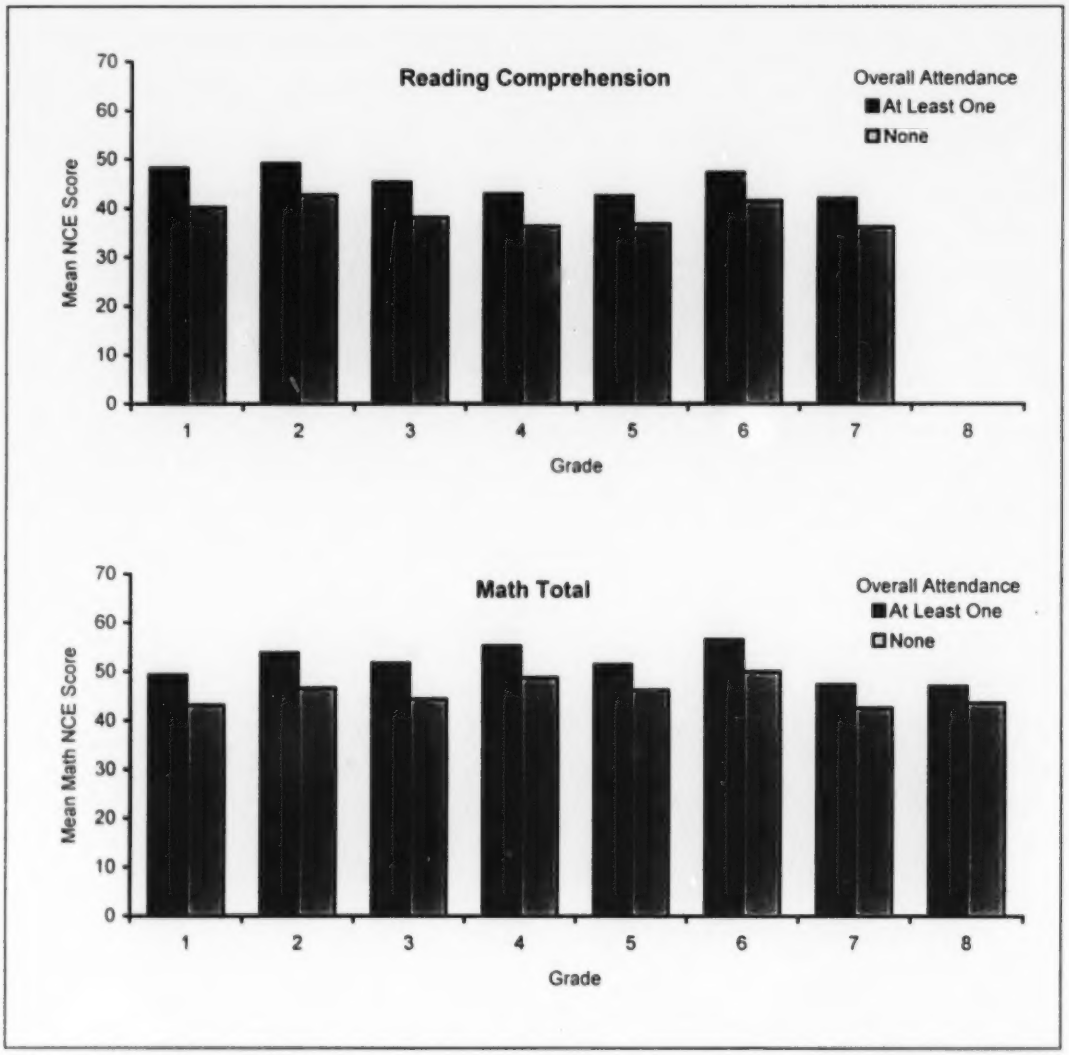


*Figure 3.* Mean *ITBS/TAAS* reading comprehension and mathematics total NCE scores by overall representation at parent conferences.

Taken together, results indicated that children whose parents attended at least one parent conference had higher *ITBS/SABE* reading comprehension and mathematics total scores. The effect of parent involvement, operationalized in terms of attendance at parent conferences, was small. Nonetheless, one should keep in mind that parent conferences were only one of many ways in which schools involved parents. Therefore, it is unlikely that overall attendance alone captured the full array of activities in which parents may have become involved, many of which may have contributed to student outcomes.

Moreover, although significant differences in outcome measures were found between children with and without parental representation, the actual cause for such differences cannot be explained. It is conceivable, for example, that parents who attend conferences also enhance their children's learning in other ways. Such parents may have more time to read to their children, be more prone to engage their children in academic-oriented activities (e.g., trips to the museum), or be involved in their children's school activities. Because of the nature of the data collection process, such factors remained unexplained in the present study. In summary, given the issues presented and the present findings, one could suggest that parent attendance was one of the contributors, though marginal, to children's *ITBS/SABE* reading and mathematics scores.

These findings have important theoretical and pragmatic implications regarding the role of parental involvement in children's academic success. Effect size is generally not reported, making it difficult to interpret the magnitude of findings. For the purpose of program evaluation, it is advisable to keep in mind that the documentation of attendance at parent conferences portrays only a limited picture of parent involvement in schools.

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